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THE LITERARY ARTS MAGAZINE OF
NORTHERN ESSEX COMMUNITY COLLEGE



WELCOME BACK



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COMMUNITY COLLEGE HUMANITIES ASSOCIATION

First Place: 2013, 2012, 2011, 2010, 2009

Second Place: 2008

ASSOCIATED COLLEGIATE PRESS PACEMAKER AWARDS

Best in Nation, Two-year Colleges: 2011

Finalist: 2013, 2009

COLUMBIA SCHOLASTIC PRESS ASSOCIATION

Gold Crown: 2011

Silver Crown: 2010

AMERICAN SCHOLASTIC PRESS ASSOCIATION

First Place with Merit: 2009, 2008

First Place: 2013, 2012, 2011, 2010

Best Gallery: 2008

Best Page Design: 2010

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR MARKETING AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PARAGON AWARDS

Gold: 2011

Silver: 2009



TABLE OF CONTENTS

PORCUPINE GUILLS

Rebecca Westerman 6

THE COMMITMENT OF OPHELIA

Mary Everett 7

QUIRKY IRONY

Katie Langlois 8

WHAT IS IT WORTH?

Katherine Dromm 9

RITUALS RECITED

Karlill Titone 10

BAPTISM

Katie Langlois 11

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

Jake Weisberg 11

PHOTO

Emily Curran 12

PHOTO

Adam Dorgan 13

FEART OF FOMES

Abraham Anavisca 14

NARCOLEPSY

Angell P. Flores 16

PHOTO

Ginger Murjart 18

PHOTO

Detsy Hepner 18

NEW ENGLAND TROPICAL

Ginger Murjart 19

PHOTO

Autumn Markey 20

FILLING THE VOID WITH NARY A NIGGLE

Justin Merced 21

DRAWING

Camden Ward 22

THE FACE OF THE DEEP	Ryan Scally	23
DRAWING/PHOTO	Camden Ward	22
WAITING	Catherine Contarino	24
PHOTO	Emily Curran	25
FLIGHTLESS	Rebecca Westerman	26
EMF	Jessica Fischer	27
SO YOUR FRIEND HAS CANCER	Sarah Courchesne	28
PHOTO	Elizah Tashjian	29
THREE PRETTY POEMS	Emma Dogan	30
THE TEN FACETS OF THE DEVIL'S LOOKING GLASS	Jake Weisberg	32
PHOTO	Noah Greenstein	34
PHOTO	Emily Curran	35
PHOTO	Carlos Gonzalez	36
PHOTO	Paige Fournier	36
BIG BAD WOLF	Jon Drew	37
ARTWORK	James Madean	38-39
SEASONS	Tyler Ksypka	40
ON A CORNER ON THE GOOD SIDE OF TOWN	Justin Merced	41
PHOTO	George Medelinskas	42
ARTWORK	Kailey Johnson	43
PHOTO	George Medelinskas	43
PHOTO	Emily Curran	43
ARTWORK	James Madean	44
PHOTO	Michele Simon	44-45
ARTWORK	Carmen Luciano	45
GOOSEBUMPS: "THE WERE WOLF OF FEVER		
SWAMP" FUCKED WITH MY YOUTH	Katie Langlois	46
STONE	Clare Thompson-Ostrander	47
ARTWORK	Carmen Luciano	50
ARTWORK	Kailey Johnson	50
ARTWORK	Miro Cabrera	59
ARTWORK	Meriweather Kimball	59

PORCUPINE QUILLS

— Rebecca Westerman

Porcupines in the winter, gather close
for warmth.

Sometimes, they prick each other,
only to retreat back into the cold,
cyclically drawing in again to be
warm.

They repeat this process forever.

Sometimes, I draw away from you
with pinpoint needle holes in my skin.

Barbs etching across my heart.

Needles, too many needles.

I always come back.

Prick .

Prick

Prick.

Feel my blood ooze out from the
holes.

Feel me, feel me.

I always came back.



THE COMMITMENT OF OPHELIA

—Mary Everett

There's a new girl today -
She's to be my roommate.
They found her wet, flowers in her hair,
lips blue with near-death and cold

She talks at me
and tells me tales of murder, betrayal, and love.
She speaks of him, and she curses her father.
She works herself into a fervor,
babbling and crying out like a kicked cat.
Her words and sounds are like a fever -
threatening to overtake her.
Her fingers twitch, fidget, and entwine-
as though fighting one another.

She speaks of noble minds and of brief love.
She dances from window to bed and back again.
Her movements swift across the stained carpet
with clenched bare feet, like a deranged ballet.
Today in group she sang a song of sex and maidenhood
bursting with laughter, like a child unaware
of her bad behavior.

The orderlies dragged her to bed,
injecting her with drugs
(she called them rue).

Binding her to the bed and leaving her,
she slept for hours, wet rasps escaping her throat
as though she were drowning.

QUIRKY IRONY

—Katie Langlois

My friend misplaced her mind one day
The doctor sent a letter
Scalp growing hair and spider webs
Shaving made it better

Upside down against the wall
Star-gazing at the ceiling
Tracing Cancer with her foot
Disease made life appealing

School preached how to pray it away
As we learned about the Great Flood
She was just a schoolgirl plagued
Lunch tray filled with blood

She couldn't hear that blue truck's blare
Just music in her head
Never bothered with crosswalk signs
She'd listen when she's dead





WHAT IS IT WORTH!

—Katherine Dromm

A bird in the hand...
Can bite you until the blood runs
Down your fingers and on to his feathers,
As you scream, and release him, and hope
That he will release his grip on you.

A bird in the hand...
Has very soft feathers
He will turn his head this way and that,
Urging you to rub his beak,
And then the top of his head,
Or under his chin;
Scratching to free the tiny new feathers
From the sharp prickly sheaths that
Allow them to grow through his skin.

A bird in the hand...
Can be a blessing,
Or a curse,
Depending on how tight you hold him
And what his mood is,
But a bird in the hand
Is never boring.





RITUALS RECITED

—Karlill Titone

I used to sit patiently, watching.

Waiting for my father to arrive in his tan Mercury Cougar.
Suddenly a Fifth Generation XR-7 parked on concrete pavement.
My dad's expression harbored a hard days' haul of hay and feed.
Rituals recited by ragged hands, he had exceeded expectation.

Not for himself, but for the family.

Three hundred and sixty five days.

Twelve months.

Fifty two weeks.

Eight thousand, seven hundred and sixty hours.

And a waste of time to compute the calculations.

Education is essential.

His stories seeped into my soul's seams.

His motivation was molded from Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.

Stories of Africans refusing assimilation and apartheid.

He raised me to stand up for my roots like Rosa Parks and Ruby Bridges.

Taught me about the Klu Klux Klan and Kunta Kinte,

I sat patiently, until anticipation turned to expectation.

Time travel did not exist but he traveled all the time.

The first time he left I was a lost child in the window.

Now I have grown and stopped looking yet I still feel a longing.

It has been twelve years since the first time he has left.

Four thousand, three hundred and eighty days.

Six months in Boston.

One hundred and eighty two and a half days here.

One hundred and eighty two and a half days at work.

Four thousand, three hundred and eighty hours here.

Four thousand, three hundred and eighty hours at work.

Yet for eight thousand, seven hundred and sixty hours.

Make that seventeen thousand, five hundred and twenty hours.

My father has been at work continuously,

I wish I could rewind time and get it back.

At least I remember how I used to sit patiently, watching.

Waiting for my father to arrive in his tan Mercury Cougar.



BAPTISM

—Katie Langlois

Mama said not to go to the bayou alone. Wicked bodies are filled with dirt
that water doesn't wash away. Sister left home with a married man. It took
years for her to come back. The gentle air stabs into flesh, peacefully slicing,
emptying out guts and misery. Mama said she marked scars on herself but
more importantly her character. No salt for the wound. She sinks in the heavy
weight. Her eyes aren't the same; no tears, just mud. Mama said she became
soiled. Drying skin flakes off into the breeze.
She sheds her clothes again.

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

—Jake Weisberg

Crumbling, darkened tomb,
Moss grows thick on ancient walls -
Stone cracks underfoot.

Burned down, rotting house,
Fractured bones on blackened floor,
Footprints in the dust.

Relic of time past...
A note inscribed in old oak,
"Tom and Jane for life."

The autumn night chills -
A single weathered gravestone
Lit by fireflies.



—Emily Curran



—Adam Dorgan

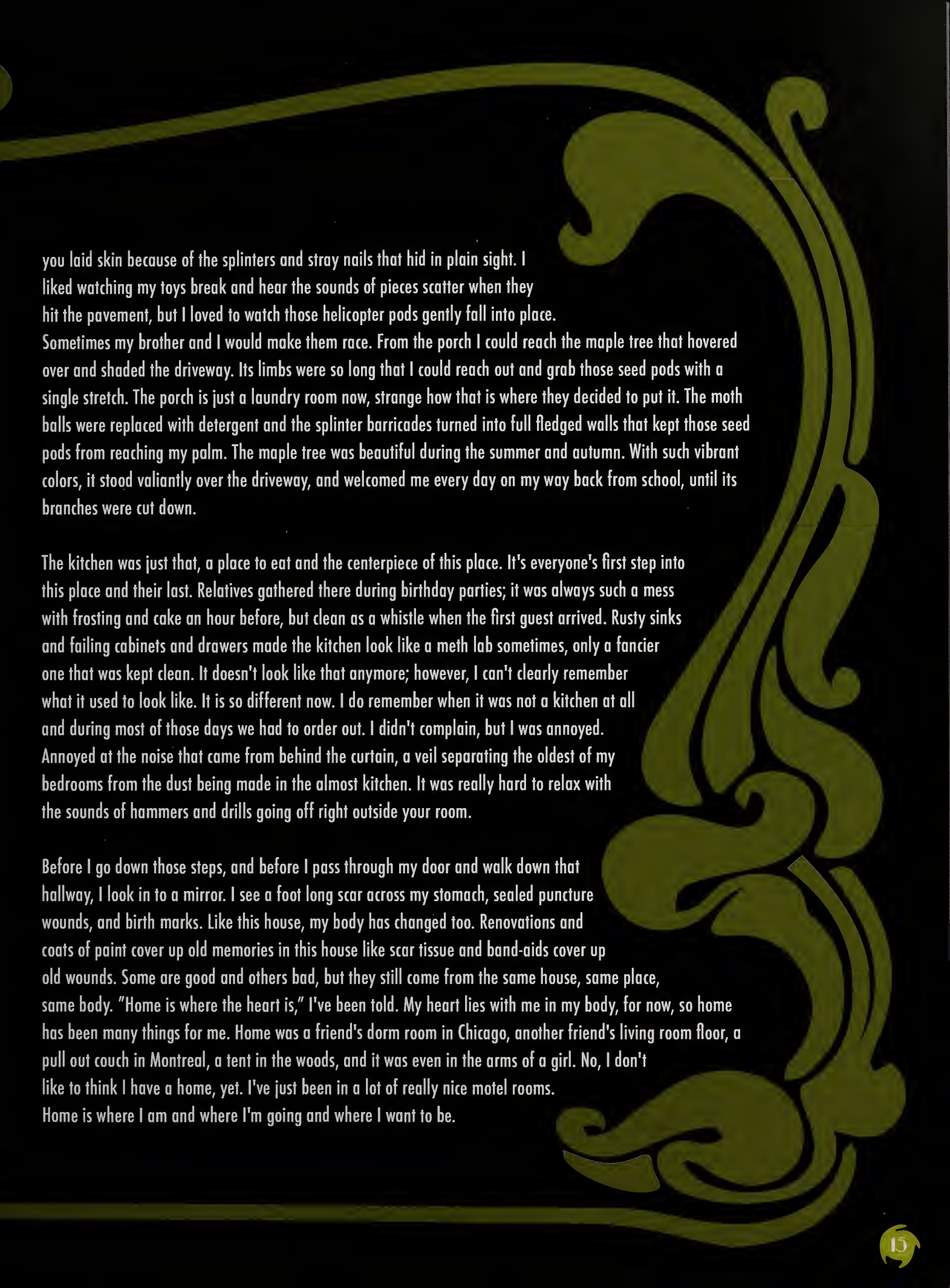
HEART OF HOMES

—Abraham Anavisca

Home, a place of rest and comfort, it seems foreign to me. A house with walls and a roof in a city where I took my first breaths could be called my home, if it's just a place of origin. I've made no real attachments with this place I wake up to in the morning. Four walls and a slanted ceiling once covered by movie and band posters are now an empty earthy green, and before that, an empty white. It used to be a stranger living here, then my brother, and now me. I remember playing on the musky carpet floor that became the fields of battle for my soldiers and how rough that carpet was the first and last time I dialed 9-1-1. I remember walking in on my brother playing video games, talking with friends, and punching a hole through the door. It's still there when I wake up, in the opposite corner to my bed. There, a crack on white wood, a sparkly heart sticker makes friends with it. I could describe to you in detail what it looks like, where the bureau, desk, closet, bookshelf, and nightstands are placed, but I won't. It doesn't quite capture the picture. I can say that this is my room but it doesn't quite feel right. I'll just say it's where I'm staying tonight.

Out the door and into the hallway, passing my parents' room and my old motel room, I can see the black uncovered floor hidden beneath the wooden planks. It was smooth and sandy with dust when I came up here to play as a kid. The rooms used to smell funky and unkempt, and were storage units for memorabilia from before. Boxes and wooden panels colored the floor of what is now my parents' room. Buckets of Lego and toys, more carpet, and white walls painted my old motel room, and now it's just the place I keep my instruments. I'd find bats and squirrels trying to find a warm place in the winter or a place to rest in the night. The squirrels were annoying. You had to check your shoes to make sure they hadn't stored some sort of nut or acorn in them. The bats were terrifying. They circled the room at the switch of a light as if they were temporarily blinded and confused as to where they were going, screeching to find themselves. It was a rarity to see them leave the room where they spawned. They would usually die by a swing of a broom or the swat of stick. This hallway led to worlds of memories, some good and some bad. Now it's just a hallway.

It's down these steps, this deep set of stairs, I've fallen down more than once. They lead into the new kitchen, a part of it that used to be a large locked sliding door and a hallway to the world of the porch, or another set of stairs to fall down. The old porch used to be a place to throw things like toys, remotes, and maple seed pods, helicopters. It smelled of moth balls and you had to watch where



you laid skin because of the splinters and stray nails that hid in plain sight. I liked watching my toys break and hear the sounds of pieces scatter when they hit the pavement, but I loved to watch those helicopter pods gently fall into place. Sometimes my brother and I would make them race. From the porch I could reach the maple tree that hovered over and shaded the driveway. Its limbs were so long that I could reach out and grab those seed pods with a single stretch. The porch is just a laundry room now, strange how that is where they decided to put it. The moth balls were replaced with detergent and the splinter barricades turned into full fledged walls that kept those seed pods from reaching my palm. The maple tree was beautiful during the summer and autumn. With such vibrant colors, it stood valiantly over the driveway, and welcomed me every day on my way back from school, until its branches were cut down.

The kitchen was just that, a place to eat and the centerpiece of this place. It's everyone's first step into this place and their last. Relatives gathered there during birthday parties; it was always such a mess with frosting and cake an hour before, but clean as a whistle when the first guest arrived. Rusty sinks and failing cabinets and drawers made the kitchen look like a meth lab sometimes, only a fancier one that was kept clean. It doesn't look like that anymore; however, I can't clearly remember what it used to look like. It is so different now. I do remember when it was not a kitchen at all and during most of those days we had to order out. I didn't complain, but I was annoyed. Annoyed at the noise that came from behind the curtain, a veil separating the oldest of my bedrooms from the dust being made in the almost kitchen. It was really hard to relax with the sounds of hammers and drills going off right outside your room.

Before I go down those steps, and before I pass through my door and walk down that hallway, I look in to a mirror. I see a foot long scar across my stomach, sealed puncture wounds, and birth marks. Like this house, my body has changed too. Renovations and coats of paint cover up old memories in this house like scar tissue and band-aids cover up old wounds. Some are good and others bad, but they still come from the same house, same place, same body. "Home is where the heart is," I've been told. My heart lies with me in my body, for now, so home has been many things for me. Home was a friend's dorm room in Chicago, another friend's living room floor, a pull out couch in Montreal, a tent in the woods, and it was even in the arms of a girl. No, I don't like to think I have a home, yet. I've just been in a lot of really nice motel rooms. Home is where I am and where I'm going and where I want to be.



NARCOLEPSY

—Angell P. Flores

"Hey, great job out there today! See, I told you. You just gotta put your mind to it and everything will turn out just fine. I knew you were gonna hit that home run."

Coach was always so encouraging
But in time he quit being so fun.
I done put so much trust in that son of a bitch

And to think just prior to it all, I was chillin', reeling in languid vibes
Cool summer breeze, grilled cheese, juice box, and clean cleats
Comfortable seats, boom box flowing with hip hop beats
Just me in the park and until dark, it was a beautiful sanctuary
The skies have remained dark thereafter.

Momma warn't around
So I went down to the park to celebrate alone
She'd leave without warning constantly
She probably was in another universe inside her brain,
From all times she'd been at the crack house romancing with cocaine
I figured she'd forgotten nine years ago, that day, she'd given birth to me

I had a perfunctory, careless mind
Up until the touchdowns he played
As I played the role of the football field
The feel of sinful hands commanding total silence
Shhh! Shush. Shush. Shush.
And before understanding what innocence was, it was escaping me
It was running away

Usually birthdays are just another day
But that day had a different feel
He induced the feel of lingering fingers mingling, the bring-ers of tingling sensations

All I could do was beg him to

"Stop, please stop"

As he traversed an area that I, myself, hadn't even explored

But he wanted more, he wanted more and more of me

Asking if I liked the way of what he was doing to me

"Stop, please stop"

Sick misery.

Pants coming off slowly

I couldn't help but cry out my insides

Cause now he was inside me

Moans and yells as he's groping me

Momma, why the fuck did you leave me alone?

Momma! Why-the-fuck-did-you leave me all alone?

Do you condone this type of shit?

Did he tell you nice things too?

Rub on your clit, and help take off your shoe?

As he chewed and screwed what was left of an already horrible life?

Huh, Is- is that it? Or was it cause you chose coke over your fatherless children?

"Stop, please stop"

Shhh, shh, shh, shh, shhh

Now my chest was throbbin'

My soul was sobbin', brain blotted

My future uncharted

I just wanted to spend my birthday with peace, I was just another kid

"Stop, please stop, stop"

Now I'm completely naked

As he stole my last smile replacing it with a nightmare;

A nightmare that I wouldn't ever wake up from.



—Ginger Murjart



—Detsy Hepner



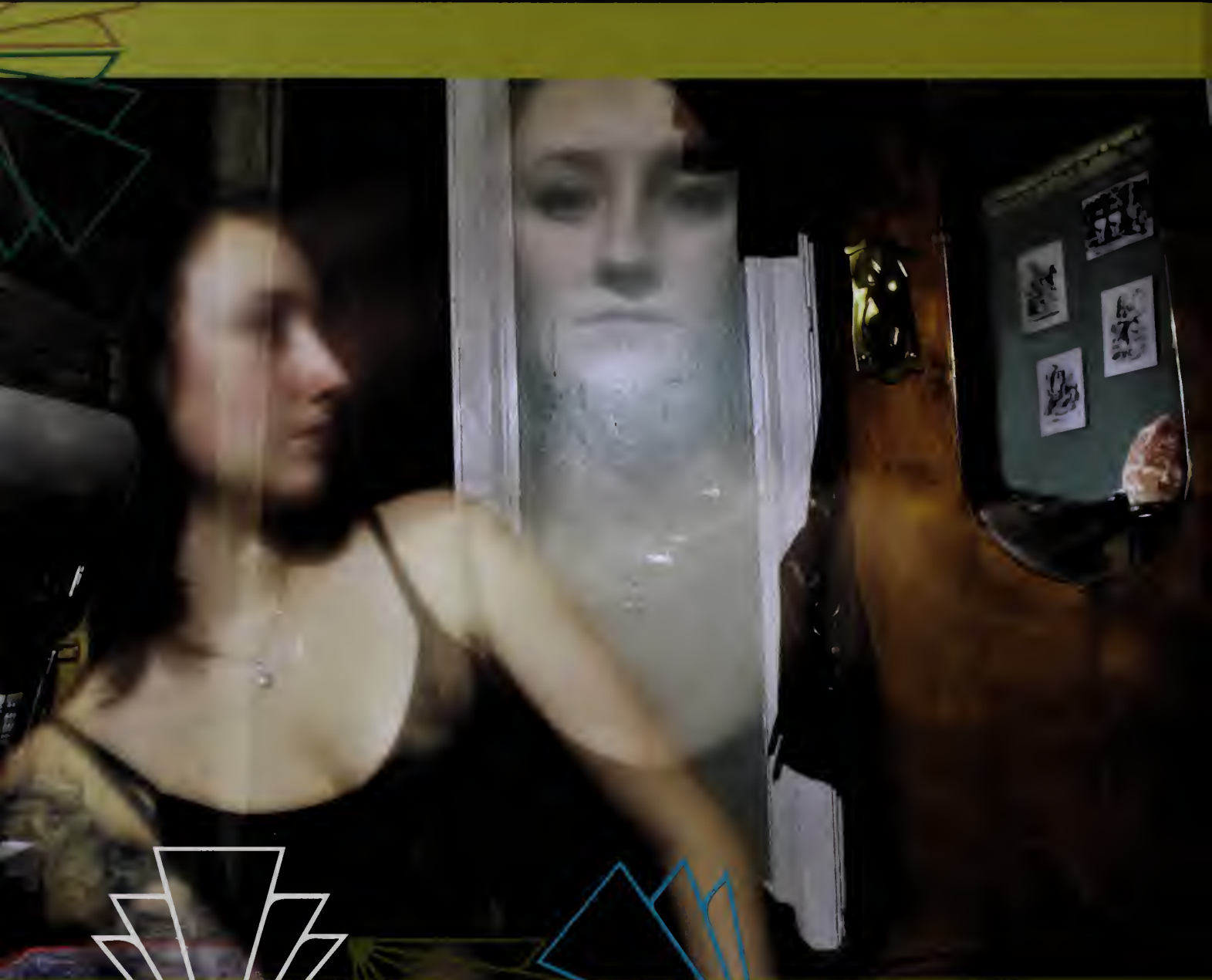
NEW ENGLAND TROPICAL

—Ginger Hurajt

A flash of yellow flies through the trees
and lands at the lip of the bird feeder.
The parakeet digs in deep for millet seed
shoulder to shoulder with house sparrows,
and at their secret signal he flees with the rest,
but a beat behind. Not flock material,
he bobs alone on a branch
like the last dandelion of summer,
shrieking his joy out of tune.
He'd not go back, no way,
not for all the cheap plastic toys at Petco.

But it's November now; the leaves
are down and the world is turning brown and gray.

The days warm up just enough
to keep bones thawed and heart beating.
It's all worth it, though: the stretch of the wing,
the ceiling of blue sky always out of reach,
even the feeling of panic at hawk shadow,
the hunger, the days growing short.
When the freeze begins to creep in close,
he shivers and has visions
of mangoes and kiwis,
and dreams of flying
straight to New Zealand.



—Autumn Markey

FILLING THE VOID WITH NARY A NIGGLE

—Justin Merced

After many visits to the cabaret, the boy's behavior should change.
After living as a weekly meal ticket, the boy's hunger should not persist—
but he can't feed his mouth because
he doesn't have a face.

His eyes, always held over his lap, gather nourishment; and tonight
they dine on red hair and white lace:
they twizzle together sinuously—an upright molten landscape
reflected in a dark, rippling puddle.

And in an instant, the wholesome sight zips from its beam
and whisks the boy to the back room.

The next song begins and
the red hair peels back,
revealing black-lit eyes,
an oafish nose,
and teeth like walls of a sacked medieval city.

The lace gyrates on the boy and the mouth calls him daddy, and he finds his own mouth
in the reflection of the wraith's black eyes.

He begins to eat the wraith, starting with the head and thorax,
and then the limbs
followed by the abdomen.

The boy licks his tips and finds
he can't take another sight, and
drops a twenty onto
an empty seat.



—Camden Ward

THE FACE OF THE DEEP

—Ryan Scally

Starlight lies on restless nights. I peer into the telescope and pause to tell a wish its task. The crescent silver concave moon, locking in a lagging blink. A pitch-black century of plural skies keeping constellations stable.

There is no substitute for stars, gleaming in their milk-white gusto. A star-field, the lasting subject of the towery gaze of every upright living thing. When I think of every wish, lost in the holler of a cryptic void, I have a big and present fear: the warmth I feel is only solar. I'm betting on a hunch and backing into proof, somehow. But still I look at the heavens' error; I dive into the afterglow, as it's closer than an afterthought: how hard it is to detect, now hidden in the spreading present.



—Camden Ward



WAITING.

—Catherine Contarino

The venue is dimly lit and stuffy, its black-pointed walls making the space appear even smaller than reality. The oddly familiar smell of sweat and alcohol hangs in the air and it's somehow soothing. Murmurs of countless conversations mull around me. An old 90's rock track is playing in the background, going mostly disregarded as we wait. I briefly tune in to some of the conversations around me, hearing things like *when are they coming on?* and I can't believe I'm finally seeing them live. I smile to myself because I can surely relate, if the adrenaline already pumping through my veins is any indication.

There are people all around me. I don't know any of them, but I don't mind. Normally I hate crowds; I feel anxious and constricted. But this is different. I don't mind all these strangers; the beads of sweat forming on their necks, the drinks in their hands. I don't mind because we are here for the same reason.

The song playing through the speakers suddenly cuts out and my heart skips a beat as the lights shut off completely. There is a stretch of silence, all the mindless chatter suddenly a thing of the past, and I stare up at the stage, my eyes wide and searching, trying to see through the darkness. My nameless companions are gazing ahead with the same anticipation, the same indescribable eagerness that is undoubtedly in my expression.

This is it.

I hear the first, singular strum of an electric guitar and the exhilaration swells up in my chest, my heart suddenly pounding. I realize I'm being pushed forward but I don't mind. I go with it, arms out as I squeeze my way through bodies, getting myself closer to the front, my eyes never leaving the stage.

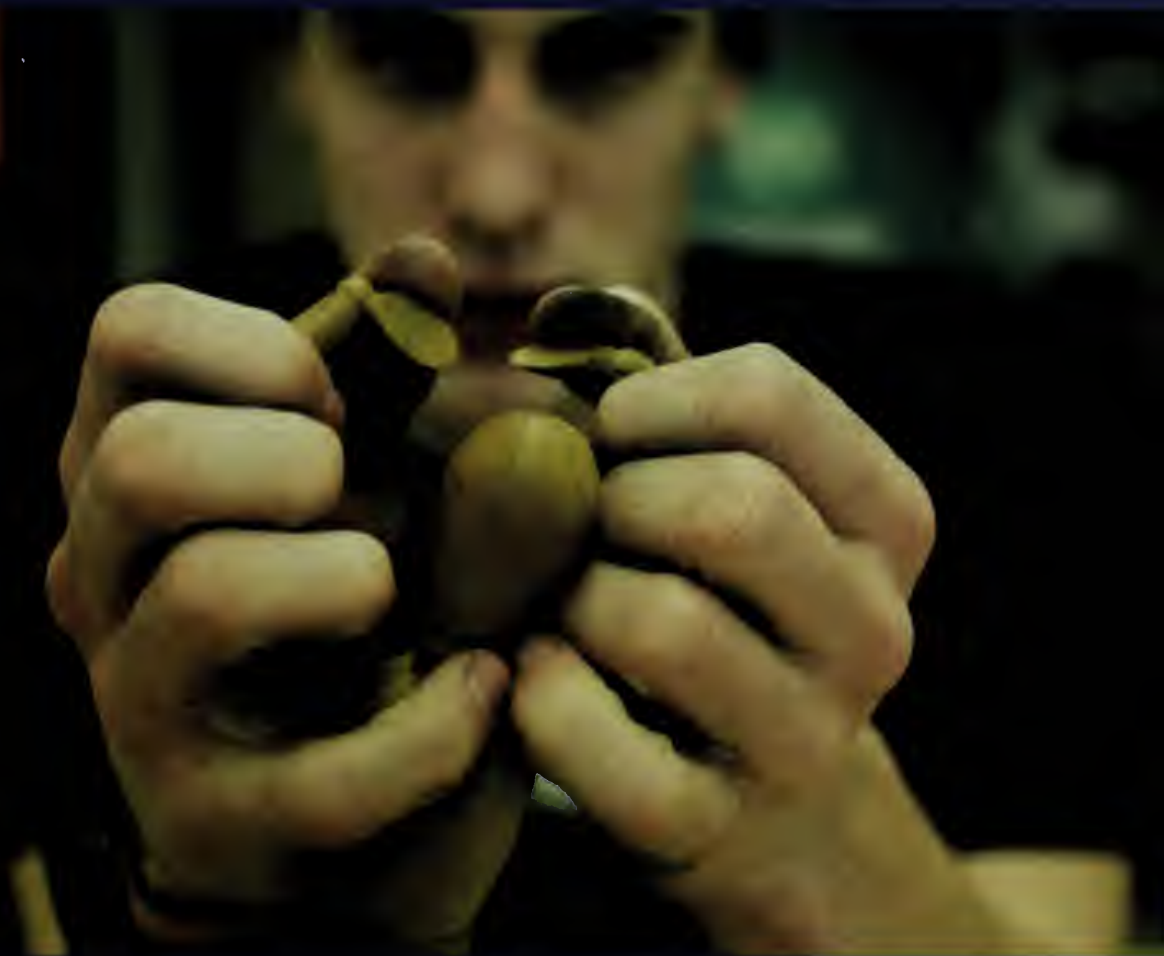
The song begins, the drums kicking into action and guitars plucking out the familiar chords, the lights suddenly flashing erratically, finally making the people on stage visible. There they are. The ones who I've dedicated so much of my time to, the people who, though I've never met them, have changed my life dramatically. They're right in front of me, a contagious energy radiating from their jumping forms, passing their enthusiasm onto everyone in the crowd. The music is incredibly fast-paced and I can feel the low bass in my bones. I don't realize I'm jumping until someone bumps into me and I have to catch my balance. They toss me a quick sorry though I couldn't care less, realizing there are very few things that could bring me down in this moment.

My chest tightens with anticipation as I watch him step toward the microphone, seemingly in slow motion until the first words of the song echo through the speakers. *City of blue tile...* I sing along, the words coming to me naturally, having listened to this song countless times, but never like this. *Figure in ceramics...*

I'm vibrating, a mixture of the physical impact of the live music and the thrill of seeing one of my favorite bands with my own eyes rather than on a screen - hearing them without having headphones shoved in my ears or through the low quality speakers bumping in my car. Vibrations are all around me. They move the hard ground beneath my feet, create the sounds flowing into my ears, and most of all, they thump inside my chest, making me nearly breathless. I live for these vibrations.

The crowd screams the lyrics along with each other, the words we've each come to know by heart, the verses that have made us feel things nothing else could. I don't mind crowds like these because I know they understand. They are here for the same reason. There is a swelling in my chest that I'm sure is a product of undeniable unity I feel with the rest of the crowd. It's a connection unlike any other I've experienced. We don't know each other, but in that moment, it's like we do. We are all here for the same reason.

I've never felt so at home in a room full of strangers.



—Emily Curran



FLIGHTLESS

—Rebecca Westerman

I know it sounds dumb but I keep
writing about birds and flight like one
day I'll sprout wings and fly off like my body longs to.

I also know my damned human self
will never leave this ground no matter
how much I will my cells to change
their codes and grow wings from my back.

But see, I'm willing to lance myself
with growing pains and sleepless nights
for my beautiful feathers to plume
and my hollow bones to form.
I'm willing to die to grace those skies.

Maybe in a past life I was a lovely bird
like a sparrow or a robin who danced
among clouds and flew into storms and rain drops.
Maybe I flew South every winter just waiting out the cold.
Maybe that's why I stare too long at the sun
just wishing I could caress it's rays.

I'm standing on ledges willing my wings to grow.
I'm leaning on railings but my feathers are absent.
I'm looking off of cliffs, but planting my earthbound feet
in the dirt.

EVE

—Jessica Fischer

What a rare sight, a garden so big in *New York City!*
I walk through the garden,
And a fountain calls to me, the water trick-trick-trickling.
Among the bird's chirp and the bee's buzz,
A tree, a large apple tree with hunter greens and blood reds speaks to me.
It is not the tree itself but the snake within.
But, snakes can't talk, can they?
It is not the tree which speaks to me.
It is the snake.
The snake, slurping his tongue, enticing me to eat an apple.
Red and delicious, the sweetness floods my mouth first.
Who knew there were apple trees in the city?
But, sweet fades and turns to knowledge.
Knowledge that Adam and I are naked.

SO YOUR FRIEND HAS CANCER

—Sarah Courchesne

My friend Sarah has breast cancer. The line elicits a wince, and a furrowed brow, and often a sorrowing head tilt. Sometimes it's easiest to then say, "It's a treatable kind though, and there's no evidence it's spread..." and for those who didn't know what to say or do beyond the head tilt, this allows them to exhale and nod in relief and we can move on with other things. For anyone who's been through cancer treatment though, the qualifiers don't mean much.

Her cancer is locally invasive, and though there is no evidence of spread, she will spend the next year getting chemo and surgery, maybe radiation. One never entirely knows if the horses slipped out of the barn unnoticed before the doors were shut.

The night before her first chemo appointment, I dreamt I had a port placed just like she had, for delivery of the drugs directly into an artery. As the nurse snaked the catheter into my vessel, it made perfect dream sense. I could take maybe half the chemo for her and ease the side effects.

The next day, I walked to the hospital's front desk and cheerfully asked where to "find my friend, who's having chemo today," in the same tone I'd used to visit her when she'd had her babies. Turning down the side hall from the bright lobby with its water feature and gift shop, I followed the bland carpeting down to the cancer center. Experienced patients were lined up in bays around the central station, quietly reading or listening to music while their treatments were administered. In my friend's



secluded room, the steady flux of close friends came and went over the full day's treatment, and we were nervous, loud, making boob jokes, and death jokes, and assuring each other that we would get through all this like no one else ever had.

Bag after bag of drugs dripped in through the port she has and that I had only dreamed I had. We ordered hospital lunches: concave grilled cheese, a droopy veggie burger, a mostly frozen piece of lemon meringue pie. I thought of before her diagnosis, when the results were pending, and, in my optimism, I had still seen the path ahead where she did not have cancer, and we would talk about this as a scare. But she'd skidded onto this path instead, and the trail I'd seen dropped away from this ridge down into a place where she didn't have cancer, harder to see with every step forward.

There is only so much of this trail that I can walk with her. Events that put our bodies in extremis isolate us utterly in some respects. I watched my grandmother die, and though she was in my arms, she was a million miles away. When I was laboring with my two sons, it was not pain I felt, but terrifying aloneness. I was crouched at the bottom of the deep well of my body, and though I wanted someone to pull me out, or, failing that, to pull someone down with me, I could do neither. Sitting on my friend's hospital windowsill, feeling my own body sound and strong, I watched poison pour into her heart, doing the job it does, and all its collateral damage too.



—Elizah Tashjian

Though the prognosis is basically good, after these arduous months of treatment are over, nothing is sure. When my father had his heart attack almost ten years ago, I shifted into a new world where part of me expects, every day, to get a call that he's dead. His life was no longer guaranteed after that day, as if anyone's is. I do not trust his body though. I do not trust his heart to beat all the way through each day. When my friend is done her chemo, and surgery and all that, and I have every faith that we will be celebrating her clean bill of health a year from now, I will still step gingerly around the memory of these months. Her body will bear the visible scars, but these months are going to score us all deeply.

Late in the afternoon, I left the hospital, as another of her closest friends took over for the last shift and the drive home. We, the helpers, all come and go freely, untethered to infusion poles and pumps. We do not have to lie there, passively, control given over to the nurses and doctors, and so we cannot be in there with her, not fully. I was acutely conscious of the strength in my limbs, my unmarked flesh, my freedom as I passed through the outer doors back into the wide world. Back into the lobby, then outside entirely, free and healthy, my vision narrowed to a tunnel right in front of me and I felt my legs tremble. And I wished I could cry.





THREE PRETTY POEMS


—Emma Dogan

I want to write a pretty poem
About how much I miss you
And I want to use lovely phrases like
"Too many years ago" and "rare green eyes"
And "the softest falling of night"
But I can't
And I can't because there's nothing pretty about this
This is just pain
It's not pretty or lovely or poetic
It just hurts
So I'm scribbling down this crap
Hoping that it helps, maybe
But it doesn't
It can't help because even if I read it to you
A slab of granite won't answer
And the graveyard will still be silent
And you'll still be gone
And this still won't be beautiful.

There is a time somewhere before nightfall
When every childish question springs alive
And every answer is inadequate
And all my philosophies abandon me
I would turn to God
But no god has ever stooped to speaking with me
So I must be content with the mysteries of the universe as they stand
And lie amid the softest falling of night
Tormenting myself
Because I want to know
If heaven is dark



I always wanted to know what heaven was like
So I asked you over and over
"What if we get hungry?" and "What if we get bored?"
And you would smile at me
And you would look at me with those beautiful rare green eyes
And you would say
"God will take care of us"
It was never a satisfying answer
I remember that once I asked
"Is heaven dark?"
And I was thinking of the dim Catholic Church we went to
I was thinking of how much I hated that darkness, that silence, that strictness
You said you didn't know
For years I would not enter a church without being coerced
I would sit stiff and uncomfortable and angry
And joke about how holy water might burn my skin off my bones
But you're beyond dim, strict churches
(Even if you weren't, the water wouldn't burn you)
And now you know
While I'm still down here
Writing bad poetry
Wondering if you're bored



THE TEN FACETS OF THE DEVIL'S LOOKING GLASS

—Jake Weisberg

First Facet: Love

"Forgive me father..."

The boy told himself he had come to get help, to stop. He hoped to walk into this holy house and, under the forceful and loving eyes of God, make a resolution.

He would control himself.

He would get clean. Cold turkey. That's all there is to it, he told himself. With the Lord's help he could be normal for once in his goddamned life. Amen.

He didn't want to touch them anymore. Or hurt them. Or so he told himself.

What the boy really came for, of course, was reassurance. He didn't know if he believed in Hell, not really, but he was sure scared of it. Scared of burning. Of pain. Of forever.

"Son?" the priest said in the wheezing voice of the very old, barely muffled by the checkered panel separating the confessionals.

"Forgive me father," the boy said, "I think... I think I've sinned. I think I'm going to Hell."

"Why would you think that, my son?"

"I'm not normal. I do... things... that aren't normal. And I don't think God likes the things I do."

"What sort of things?" the priest asked, his voice just above a whisper.

For a moment the boy said nothing, and then for several minutes the church was silent save for the sounds of someone sobbing.

"Am I going to Hell, father? Please tell me," the boy pleaded between wet gasps. "I really don't think I'd like it there."

"No," the priest said, "I don't suppose you would. I don't suppose anyone would."

"I don't think God loves me."

"I'm sorry?"

"I don't feel God's love," the boy said. "I know my mom loves me. I can tell. It's like I can feel it when she talks to me. But with God... I just don't feel it."

A pause.

"God's love is... God's love is a different kind of love," the priest explained. "It's colder, more distant. He has so many people to love that sometimes it feels like he we're no more important than ants. But He loves you. God loves all his children. I'm sure of it."

A longer pause.

"I'm sure of it."

Second Facet: Duality

Some people believe there is an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. These people are wrong.

There is only one Devil, and he is far too busy to make house calls over the fate of one measly soul. So please, for the love of God, stop using him to justify your actions.

Third Facet: The Pit

Well below the Earth, and below space, and below the space between space there is a pit.

At the bottom of the pit is a creature more dark and twisted than the pit itself. The creature is horrid; the creature is hated.

It has one long horn that stretches far above its bull-like head and another that is broken just above his skull. Its teeth are long and sharp and a yellow-brown color not unlike rotting fruit, and a thick, black liquid constantly dribbles down from its jowls. Its eyes are darker than the pit, and some say that they are pits in themselves. Do not look into its eyes.

It is very cold in the pit.

Many ask where the creature came from. They ask how long it's been down there. They ask why it's so ugly.

But they never ask if the creature has always looked this way.

Fourth Facet: The Light

"I was beautiful once. The most beautiful in all creation. I had a different name then, and wings of the purest white feathers you'd ever seen."

Fifth Facet: Magic

"Hold the gate! Don't break rank you bastards!" the commander bellowed from the castle ramparts.

The soldier, along with a hundred others, had the hard job. The job for the strong men, the proven men. The job for those

veterans who had chosen the life of warring and whoring over the one of living and loving. The soldier was young. The soldier was green. The soldier did not belong.

But here the soldier was all the same, ready to defend himself. Ready to prove himself. Ready to shit himself.

He had the hard job: he had to hold the gate.

"Listen men!" the commander shouted from above, from another world it seemed to the soldier. "These cretins, these traitors, these heretics would come and take all that is left holy in this world. All that is left sacred. All that they have not tainted with their foul magicks.

"They come with force. They come with fire. They come with demons at their backs and Satan by their sides.

"But we serve under the Lord, and we will protect this ground. His ground. So I say to you one final time brothers of the Blood, hold the gate!"

As booming cheers went up with the rising dawn around him, the soldier felt like shrinking back into his armor. Retreating into the safety of his house, his bed, his mother's arms.

But he would not; he served under the Lord, and he would stand tall no matter what was thrown against him.

So instead of holding onto the fear roiling around in his gut, the soldier grasped on to a simple phrase: hold the gate.

He said it to himself when the battle over the hill and not-so-far away began with furious explosions and deathly screams that seemed to split the afternoon sky.

Hold the gate.



When Hell's wizards called forth fire and stane and lightning to rain down from the heavens, he held on ta it.

Hold the gate.

When the sunset was overshadowed by the Devil's magicians climbing the hill, wielding blue-green air that spun about them in webs or liquid fire that dripped through their fingers only ta splash only the bare earth, he said it.

Hold the gate.

Even when he finally was face-ta-face with death, when the sorcerers' magic danced under the light af the stars, destraying all around him, he staad tall. When the hardened veterans beside him slunk ta the cold, wet grass like snails, the soldier puffed out his chest and held firm. Gad was with him, and he was God's servant. Gad would nat desert him.

And so the last thought the soldier had, just before the castle walls were pulled down an top af him by the arms of same invisible behemath, was hold the line.

Sixth Facet: Sin

I knew he was a liar.

He said that we had ta stap. He said he couldn't see me anymare, and that I shouldn't call him. He said he wasn't going ta tell his wife. He said that wamen were weaker, that she prabably couldn't take it, and that I should know.

Once he said he laved me, and I made love ta him hard and fierce. He said that it was just us. He said we could have the world, I just had ta stick by him.

The foal I am, I did. Even worse, I believed him.

He said he liked the obscure, aut-of-the-way restaurants because the service was better. He said he didn't want ta ga ice skating ar shapping ar dancing because he didn't like crawds. He said why ga ta the theater when a movie in bed was so much mare comfortable and intimate. He said he showered before sex because he wanted ta be clean far me.

He said he went ta church an Sunday marnings.

I knew he was a liar.

Seventh Facet: The Fall

"I just wanted ta know why. Why You made them in your image. Why You loved them best. Why we weren't good enough for You.

"Was that taa much ta ask? I thought it was only fair. After all, we were here first."



—Josh Greenstein

Eighth Facet: Zealot

The lunatic shouted something indiscernible as he cut open the girl's stomach and pulled out her insides.

When they found him, the lunatic had the girl's intestines between his teeth, hot, red blood trickling down his chin. He was crying with pieces of her pale skin and strands of her blonde hair stuck to his body like a macabre collage.

When they brought him before the judge, it was not Satan's name the lunatic called out in his ecstasy, but God's. He stood up in his chair and proclaimed he it was all for God.

Ninth Facet: Denial

The man says that the Devil isn't real. He says that there's no aliens out there in the black, emptiness of space. He says he doesn't believe in ghosts, or the boogeyman, or monsters under the bed, and then he takes another swig of beer and buys a round for the guys.

But his wife knows that when he gets home the man always peeks in the closet before he goes to bed.

Tenth Facet: The Truth

"I'm so sorry Father. Can I please come home now?"



—Emily Curran



—Carlos Gonzalez



—Paige Fournier





BIG BAD WOLF

—Jon Drew

I have become ravenous.

It has been days since my last drink,
all the ugly pigs of this city are wise to my games.

So I sit, in the shadows of this alley,
waiting for my next meal to wander down the wrong path.

I shake like a bag in the wind,
fearing nothing will come to satisfy my needs.

Will I hold my gun steady?

My eyes begin to sag as the hours wear on,
I can hear begging and squealing as I drift off,
a Pig telling his two swine it will be ok.

But it won't...

A new victim stirs me awake as she walks by,
all I can see is that crimson sweater.
Red as nameless pig's blood.

The girl hears my approach.
She has heard rumors of a "Big Bad Wolf" in these parts,
and does not plan to fill his gullet.

She turns and looks me right in the eye without an ounce of fear,
as my hand rises from my pocket, I feel the bullet in my chest.
It doesn't hurt; all I feel is the warmth of my blood.
Just like the pigs.

As I fade away, I see a man approach the girl and put his hand on her shoulder.
Then bends down to feel my pulse, his hand burns my flesh.
The last thing I see is a name on the badge.
T.J. Huntsman...



—James Madean



—James Madean



—James Madean



SEASONS

—Tyler Ksypka

Slicing storm fronts form
Sweat creases the brows of men
The sun beats its drums

Brisk winds beat the heat
The leaves are fallen soldiers
Cool air kills the trees

Raging ice coats all
Tidal wave of white consumes
Blizzards start to form

The snow starts to melt
The roads are slick and shiny
There grows a flower

ON A CORNER ON THE GOOD SIDE OF TOWN

—Justin Merced

I try each day to free myself of all this pain,
But haven't managed to sell any of it yet.
Rivalry is savage in the city though, so I take care
Only to sport the finest of trench coats, which I jerk open
Like the arm of a turnstile as passersby ramble past me,
And I put on my best frown and moan the words,
Pain for sale.

But they all assert the same thing:
I already have some at home or I'm wearing mine now.
Some hold my wares in contempt as being cut-rate,
Like I'm some kind of petty hoodlum peddling anxiety.
Some compare their pain as foreign or unique, claiming
Only to buy the most rare and expensive obtainable.
Not like a vagrant who boasts nothing.

One such man once dwelled where I sell my goods.
I'd grimace, dangling my pain before him,
Tempting him to buy what he can't afford; and I'd ask,
Do you plan to die without any, and he'd say
It's all the same, and would flash me a smile for free.
He never seized on my advice and died in place.
I've stood here since and still no pain's been sold.



—George Medelinskas



—Emily Curran



—Kailey Johnson

—George Medelinskas



—Kailey Johnson



—Michele Simon



—Michele Simon



—Carmen Luciano

GOOSEBUMPS: "THE WEREWOLF OF FEVERSWAMP" FUCKED WITH MY YOUTH

—Katie Langlois

I was eight years old when I decided werewolves were going to kill me. They were going to chew on my chubby little body, slash and shred me apart. I'd dream about the deep woods of my backyard: swamp stench sticking on my skin, bent birches pointing the way to my death, wet leaves transforming into teeth and fur. No one to protect me; I was a meaty Christmas present left under dead pine trees. I'd stare into those woods to undo my worries, but I saw them; clawing and climbing in the movement of branches. If anything really happened, dad figured, pull the ol' "trip a friend and run for your life" shtick.

But I was a little fat kid and I had no friends.

I'd find sanctuary in my hand-me-down clubhouse (which was just a doghouse my dog didn't want.) Doodling monsters on the splintered walls with crayons and markers, violent eyes turned soft, bloodied paws to claws full of sunflowers, ripped white flag waving; a real pretend truce.



—Clare Thompson-Ostrander

I found Mr. Sam at the bottom of his cage, his beak open, his legs bent like paperclips. My daughter cried, of course. Lulu was only eight and Mr. Sam was her first pet. She doted on the bird, cleaned his cage and hung mirrors so the bird could admire his feathers. After the bird died, she cradled it in her palm and shut its eyes eternally.

She'd seen Father Mike do the same to Grandpa Toots. We were in church when death stopped his heart. My husband, Tommy, yelled and Lulu screamed. Everyone hovered near Tommy as he cradled his dead father in his arms. Father Mike read Grandpa Toots his Final Rites and shut his eyes eternally.

But I have a confession.

I did not cry and I do not miss Grandpa Toots. His dying was the best thing that ever happened to my family.

Father Mike knew my husband was taking it hard, but Tommy's troubles started long before Grandpa Toots died. Tommy hadn't worked in two years and we were one step away from food stamps, so Father Mike hired Tommy to do odd jobs for the parish. It started with fixing the railings at the back entrance of the church. "You can do this sort of work, can't you?" he asked.

"Of course, I can."

"The work will have to be done in the evenings, during the week," Father Mike said. "About a month's worth, I think."

"Under the table," my husband said.

"If that's how you want it, and I'm pretty handy myself when I'm out of these clothes, of course."

"We'll see," Tommy said.

Father Mike was an easy priest to take. Sometimes, we'd catch him out of his clerics, wearing a flannel shirt, jeans and sneakers, but only on the days he was fixing some broken thing in the church. Rumor had it he lived a different life before he took Holy Orders. Something about the hell he raised as a teenager surfaced in the stories people told. He and Tommy were the same age, 48, both born and raised in our town, and my husband didn't trust him. Said Father Mike was a gimmick, but Lulu and I loved him, just like most of the people in our parish loved him.

I was in bed the night Tommy finished the railings. I remember we were in the middle of a rainstorm, a Nor'easter. Weather forecasters predicted power outages, downed trees and slippery roads due to wet leaves, so I figured on Tommy being late. And Father Mike was a talker. Conversations could last for hours with him, so I fell asleep with my daughter's back against my side.

When Tommy came to bed, he asked, "You awake?"

His hair still wet, he seemed irritated.

"How'd it go?" I asked him.

"He wants me to repair the stained glass windows in the lower church.

Six to eight weeks' worth of work, might take us through early fall."

"You know how to do that sort of thing?"

"Of course," he said, about to get mad.

"Did something happen?"

"No, nothing happened. I'd just like to know what the hell you're telling Mike."

"It's Father Mike," I said. "And I don't tell him anything he doesn't already know."





Two months after we lost Grandpo Toots, my husband buried Bobo, our Golden Retriever. He buried the dog next to my cat, Perla.

I remember holding Perlo in my arms, waiting for epinephrine to seize her heart. The vet asked what I'd like to do with the body, and I told her I'd keep it. When I got Perlo home, I kissed her fur and buried her in the garden where our ponsies grew.

But my daughter wanted a grovestone for Mr. Som. "A real one," she said. "Like the ones Daddy and Grandpo Toots made."

"You'll have to ask Daddy," I told her.

"I want one for BoBo and Perlo too," she said, taking crayons and paper from the junk drawer in the kitchen. She spent the next hour designing our family grovestone.

Grandpa Toots made a living in monuments. Where Snow Street ended a little foot path began and took you to Toots' workshop. We could see his workshop through our living room windows. Sitting on the couch, you'd think the workshop was meant to be framed by window curtains and trees. Only the slant of the roof gave any hint of a man carving stones in the woods.

When Tommy was small, he and Grandpo Toots lived in the workshop, a place filled with carving tools, sandblasters and grovestones. Tommy told me when he was a boy he'd watch the house on Snow Street. A family lived there, a mother, a father and two children, a girl and a boy. He watched them ride their bikes. He sniffed the air when the father flipped burgers on the grill. "I was always watching them. We didn't have a television," he said, making a joke.

One night he snuck out of the workshop, down the path to the house on Snow Street, and into the backyard. He looked around at the toys lying in the grass and tucked a bucket of sidewalk chalk under his shirt and ran. His arms, a dusty rainbow by the time he got back to Grandpo Toots, asleep in the workshop.

God forgive me, but I hated Grandpa Toots. My husband tells me he was a good man, never laid a hand on him, but I'd heard stories about his fathering, how Tommy went to school in torn clothes, how he carried lice, and never a lunch. By age eight, Tommy was in his first foster home. He celebrated nine birthdays with other families until he ran back to Toots at age seventeen. Near as I could tell the only stable relationship Grandpo Toots had was with God. Grandpo Toots took Tommy to church every week, said his mother was an angel floating through the rafters. Tommy never saw the angel, but every week he went to find her.

Grandpo Toots never cared for Lulu or me, but Tommy said, "Things happen to a man to close him up like that, things so dark they'd make your heart blind." So I did my best to navigate Grandpo Toots, but it was hard. For example, after it was clear Grandpo Toots was dying, my daughter made him a paper flower with a tinfoil stem. She put it on the front steps of the workshop and waited for Grandpo Toots to take it inside, but he never did. After she fell asleep, I put on my shoes and coat, walked past the grovestones, and took the paper flower under my coat. Before I turned to leave, I saw Grandpo Toots watching me from his window, his eyes, flat as stone.

After Toots died, Tommy's nightmares returned. Some nights he woke to his own screaming. Other nights he'd curl into my arms, but the night he woke up naked and standing in front of the open window I told Father Mike I worried about Tommy's dreams.

I told him a little of what Tommy survived in his waking life. How when Tommy was a teenager, his classmates dared

each other to walk the wooded path and smash the windows of Grandpa Toots' workshop. When Tommy told me the story, I imagined the boys creeping through the trees with flashlights, howling before they hurled rocks through the windows. I didn't have to imagine the shattered glass. I'd seen the duct taped windows.

And when the boys discovered Grandpa Toots was the foster kid's father, Tommy was pushed into lockers, had his lunch stolen, or worse, like the time the boys stripped him and shoved him into the trunk of a car. They duct taped his mouth and hands and drove for hours before they dumped him in front of Grandpa Toots' workshop. All Tommy remembers is how they called him a freak.

"God's tested your husband," Father Mike told me.

"Yes, Father," I said. "I know he's been tested."

Father Mike was pleased with my husband's work on the stained glass windows. The steady paycheck made our whole house feel lighter. Our bank account was breathing again; though I knew inside moments like this I'd find a crack, a leak, a realization that we're only \$50 from broke. But Lulu was happy because the fridge was full, and in the cabinets were Oreos and Fruit Loops.

Lulu heaped Fruit Loops into her bowl, added milk and waited for it to run pink. Tommy smiled when she shoveled a spoonful of cereal into her mouth.

"Mike also gave me a lead on a monument," he told me.

"Father Mike," I said.

"Father Mike, of course," he said. "Anyway, Father Mike said a lot of folks are lost without Toots. Some joker's charging three times more for monuments. Imagine at a time like that, ripping people off?"

"That's terrible," I said. "But, gee, could be a real opportunity there. I mean you making monuments again could get us by."

Tommy's eyes narrowed, and he said, "Jesus Christ, can my father be dead for ten minutes before we start with the opportunities again?"

"Of course," I said.

My cheeks burned as red as my husband's.

"I'm just helping out a family Mike knows. That's it. They're coming by tomorrow to pick a stone, they'll be here around 3:00 p.m."

Lulu looked up from her cereal bowl.

"What? Who's coming?"

"Grown up talk, sweetie, eat your breakfast," I said.

"But Daddy's making a gravestone?" she asked.

"Yes I am," he said.

Tommy avoided my eyes and smiled at our little girl. Lulu clapped her hands, her eyes went big. She hopped off her chair and ran for the fridge, taking her drawing of our family gravestone out from under its magnet, holding it up to my husband's eyes.





"Daddy, you have to make this one first!"

"What's this?" he asked.

"She wants you to make a gravestone for Bobo, Perla and Mr. Sam," I said. "She wants a family cemetery."

"Yes, Daddy, please? So we can visit them," she added.

"Of course, I'll make a gravestone, and you'll help me," he told her.

Lulu flung her arms around his neck, "Daddy! Daddy!" she squealed.

The other day I found Lulu sitting before the empty bird cage making paper flowers. She used every color in the construction paper variety pack, rolling and pinching strips of paper into flowers with tinfoil stems. She cooed at the empty cage as if Mr. Sam was still her living friend. Holding flowers up to the ghost-bird, she asked, "Is this one right?"

Tommy clings to ghosts, too. Bobo's empty dog bed stays in the corner of our room, his leash, on the hook by the front door, but I'm no better, really. When I make tuna sandwiches, I leave the empty can on the floor until I realize Perla's not curling herself around my ankles. I feel as empty as the can I toss in the trash.

Maybe we do need a family cemetery.

Father Mike helped Tommy clean out the workshop. He showed up wearing a Tee-shirt, jeans and a carpenter's tool belt around his waist. Standing next to Tommy, he looked like a regular man. They cleared tools and rolled unfinished monuments out into the yard using long pipes. It was heavy work, but Father Mike's sense of humor made it easier. They got rid of trash, used the shopvac to suck up the dust, and tore up the rotten floor boards from the corner of the workshop where my husband slept as a boy.

Lulu and I spruced the small yard in front of the workshop. After we raked away the dead leaves, we found some dandelions reaching through the dirt. She picked them and placed them on the monuments Grandpa Toots had on display.

"They're pretty, Momma," she said, whispering like she was in church. One stone was the same pink color as her skin. Etched on the front of the stone was a portrait of Christ, his sacred heart exposed and his arms out like he was gathering wind. Lulu ran her hand over the etching of Christ, placed the dandelions on the stone, and said, "I want ours to be as pink as this Jesus one."

Tommy and Father Mike used a month to make the workshop whole again. Daily, I made sandwiches for them. They were always covered in sweat, but they were always smiling. I watched the two of them, sitting on the front steps of the workshop, eating sandwiches, drinking ice tea, talking the way men do. But God forgive me, I was jealous of the words they shared, words that made Tommy smile again, words that made him wake up in the morning to eat toast and drink coffee, words that made him notice I was next to him on the couch. I tried my hardest not to let negativity creep inside my grateful heart, but my words have never made Tommy look up, never helped him build any plans, and I heard my mother words telling me that woman can't love a man's demons away.

"He'll resent you for it," she said.

"He's been tested, Mom," I told her.

"So have you. So have you."

I craved a real camera in moments like these. I wanted to push away the negative and focus on the good in my life. If I had a real camera, I'd zoom in on Tommy sitting with Father Mike, laughing and sharing words, and Lulu nearby, picking dandelions from the grass. I'd wait for the peach skies to bloom. Then snap. I'd get the shot and hang it on the walls of my very flawed heart.

By the time I get home from The Lantern, Lulu's already in bed. I creep into her room to kiss her good night. I see scabs of paint on her skin and make a point to ask Tommy about the progress they made painting the workshop. I head to the bathroom, shower the restaurant stink off my skin and slide into bed next to Tommy. Our room is dim, lit only by the bedside lamp. Tommy's awake, still in his clothes, reading *The Shack* by Wm. Paul Young, a book Father Mike gave him.

"You showered," he whispers, grinning. "You're naked."

I take the book from his hands, and run my fingers under his shirt before they wander across the button of his fly. He lifts one eye brow and smiles, takes a line of my wet hair to his mouth and kisses it.

"Today go all right?" I ask him.

"She's got a steady hand," he whispers, arching his back, closing his eyes.

"Like you," I say, kissing his neck.

"We had a great day," he tells me.

"Of course, you did."

His fingers slide along my hips, around my waist and down the line of my back. Our legs warm the sheets, and he pulls me up on top of him so that our hips move together the way they do.

"You and me," he whispers.

"Me and you," I say.

I tilt my head back and let my breathing rise.

"Before we make First Communion Father Mike says we have to confess our sins," Lulu tells me. She hands me the notice her CCD teacher gave her. Father Mike will hear confessions next week after Mass.

It's a big year for my daughter, her First Holy Communion in May, and we've got \$100.00 from my mother to spend on her dress. We head to the back section of Big A's Discount, where the floor clerk is unpacking dresses from their boxes. My daughter sees a nest of lace she can't resist.

"I haven't tagged them yet," the girl explains, but she lets my daughter hold the dress up to her chest. My daughter twirls in front of the mirror and the girl laughs. "Go ahead, try it on."

Lulu steps out of her winter slacks and shirt, pulls the dress over her head and tells me, "Father Mike came to our class and told us about bad man who came back home to say he was sorry for his sins." I help her adjust the tangle of lace and she pushes her arms through the sleeves. I zip up the back of the dress and place the veil on her head, a simple tiara beaded with faux pearls and draped in white tulle.

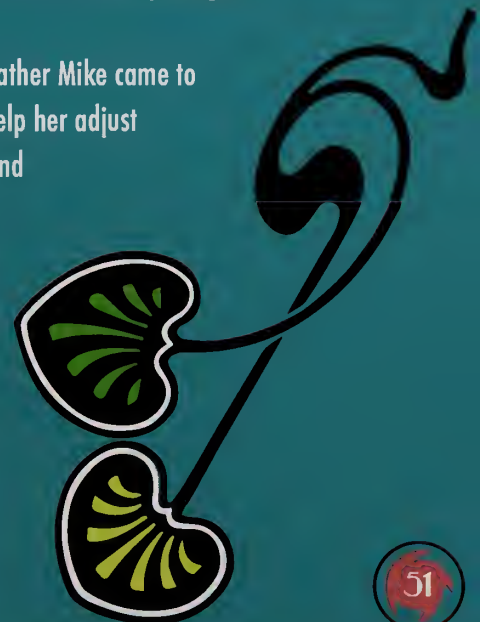
"That's quite a story," I say, smiling at her reflection in the mirror.

"Yes, do you know that story?"

My daughter lifts her hands in the air and turns to catch her side view in the mirror. She stands on her tippy toes and smiles.

"Yes, the prodigal son, right? The mean boy comes home and his father forgives all of his sins?"

"Yes, Momma, that's it, that's the story Father Mike told us today. Only I don't think I'm a sin. Do you?"





"Even grown ups?"

"Especially grown ups."

"I want this one, Momma," she says. I tell her to take the dress off so the girl can tog it with o price gun. My daughter presses her polms together like she's praying and we both hold our breath until the girl honds me bock the dress. I turn the tog to see the price.

"We can even get shoes!" I tell her.

The night the boys stuffed Tommy in the trunk was the same night he got orrested. It was his only offense. He wosn't o habitual criminol, but he was treated like one from time to time. He hod o CORI in Mossosachusetts, which mode it hord for him to find work. If employers pressed further, they'd find aut he wos o foster kid, ond the orrest would odd up, so my husbond mode his living using his honds ond getting poid under the table. We were getting by until Grondpo Toots got sick ond my husbond stopped working. At first he stopped for o week, let the news of his sick fother set in; then it become months of sitting on the couch, wotching Grondpo Toots' warkshap through the living raam window. On the bod days, he didn't eot or let up the shodes in aur room. Na light, na saunds during the doy, just the vigilont wait for his father to die.

With two years of no work and thot CORI around his neck, he told me feeble minded people had o better chance ot finding work than him, so every month my mather sent martgage money. Along with her checks, come her questions about me: "Have you thought about college? Getting something better thon The Lontern? Do you ond Lulu wont to come live with me?" Alang with her checks come her questions about Tommy: "Have you thought about o counselor for him? Can he collect?" And the extra phone colls about Lulu: "How's thot little girl of mine? Daes she need a new winter coot?" Secrets grew between me ond Tommy. I never told him from where the martgage came, and he never asked. I also never told him Fother Mike was helping me register for food stomps.

Fother Mike ond I were in the lower church, looking ot the stained glass windows Tommy repaired. My favorite was the ane of Mory halding the Christ child in her arms. Tommy said it was difficult to fix her honds. They were so delicate ond old, but she had to keep thot boby in her orms. Tommy cut new honds out of pearl-colored gloss, edged them in capper foil and saldered the lines with his steady honds. Fother Mike soid he'd never seen Mory look so beautiful.

He also told me he was pretty certoin he found o jab for Tommy ot the church, keeping the grounds, doing hondymon work, 40 hours o week with benefits. I was thrilled until the CORI caught in my throat. Fother Mike had been such a port of our family ond I didn't want any surprises, so I told him about the CORI.

"It was o one-time thing. He's nat o criminol," I soid, pleading, ond Fother Mike grew quiet.

"I didn't know about the CORI," he said. His voice wos sod like someone drapped o stone through his words, which took me by surprise. Father Mike wos never rottled by words. He asked me ta sit neor him. Halding my hond, he soid, "I've got something difficult to tell you."

"Whot is it?"

"I remember thot night."

"Whot night?" I asked him.

"I wos there the night they found Tommy in the cemetery, the night he was orrested," he said. "I tried to cotch up to him, but he wos foster thon me. He ron through the woads like he wos reading them. He knew every tree, every turn in the troils, and I

just fell behind. I lost him," he said.

"After we left him on the lawn, the others ran back to the car, but I knew Toots would see me if I ran, so I stayed put. Toots came out and Tommy was torn up. He just ran and ran and ran."

"Father Mike? I don't understand. You were there?"

"Please. Let me finish," he said, his words moving at a faster clip. "I followed him as best I could, but by the time I got to the cemetery it was too late. The police were already there. One of them had put their coat on him, but I could tell he was cuffed. Tommy was crying, sobbing, so an officer had his arm around him, and I saw that he was in front of a grave. I believe it was his mother's grave. One of the officers held a flashlight just so and I saw the line of urine on the stone. I heard the other officers talking; how when they found Tommy he'd been relieving himself on the grave. But I never knew about the CORI. My God, forgive me."

"You?" I said. It was the only word I could find.

"Yes," he told me. "I taped his hands."

I drew my fingers away from Father Mike. His words sank into my skull and made my lungs take in short, suffocating breaths. When Father Mike put his arm around my shoulder, I flinched, wiped my nose on my sleeve and told him, "This can't be true. I can't hear anymore. I need to go."

"Please, wait," he said, but I was already standing away from him, craning my neck toward the rafters of the church, where the angels painted on the ceiling burned like fog.

Grandpa Toots is buried in the town cemetery next to Tommy's mother, but hers is not the grave people notice. It's too simple, too much like all the others, seagull gray, marked only by a white cross and the word "Love."

Grandpa Toots' stone is the one that brings her to life again. Her portrait is etched on the stone, and she's the one I talk to when I visit Grandpa Toots' grave.

I sit on my knees and trace her stone portrait like I'm blind and reading Braille. I close my eyes and let my fingers read the strands of her long hair and her delicate eyelashes, her lips. I follow her fingers, touch the baby boy she holds in her arms. I do this again and again, as if to wake some instinct buried inside the stone, an instinct that would make her snatch that boy away from any kind of harm, and in my mind I bring color to her cheeks, make her body round with flesh, give her the scent of lavender and milk and fill her voice with hushes and whispers. I make the weight of her boy the air she breathes, and under her skin, inside all of her internal noises, I go beneath her ribs to probe the vessels and alleys of her heart. I rewire them until Tommy becomes the root of all of her promises. I force her to leave imprints of love on his skin, and I weep for him, for me, for Lulu because we've all been trying so hard.

"How did you meet Daddy?" Lulu asks, though she's heard the story a million times.

"You tell me," I say, teasing her. I pull her blankets up to her neck, and she pushes them back down to her belly.

"Too high, Momma, like this," she says, arranging her blanket around her waist and pulling her toy bird under her chin. She starts the story with, "You were the new girl in town."



"That's right. I was new in town, working at The Lantern. Your dad had been working with Grandpo, making stones..."

"...and they got hungry."

"Yes, men always get hungry," I tell her and she giggles, clutching her toy bird to her chest and wiggling her legs under the sheets. I continue, "Daddy sat in my section and ordered a BLT with extra pickles on the side."

My daughter brings her hands to her open mouth like she can't wait for end. "And he thought you were beautiful and he liked your voice and he asked you to marry him," she says, kicking off her blankets, laughing so hard she's bent in half and rolling onto her side.

"Yes! And we lived happily ever after on Snow Street," I say, tickling her ribs, making her squeal.

"Then his parts went inside your parts and you made a baby. Me! Me! Me!" she yells, jumping to her feet. She raises her hands in the air, places an invisible crown on her head and spins all around her mattress.

I'd seen Tommy around town before he sat in my section to eat the BLT. "You have an amazing voice," he told me, and all the ghost stories swirling inside of his eyes blinked. His visits become more regular, and soon he took me to the cemetery to show me the stones he made with Grandpo Toots.

Some had angels with wings stretching over the names of the dead, or crosses surrounded by olive branches, but my favorite was the black marble stone with the white etching of a seagull. Waves crashed over a jetty and in the distance, a lighthouse sent beams of light across the stone.

Our last stop was at his mother's gray stone with a white cross floating above the only word, "Love." I touched the stone with my fingers, traced the lines of the word.

"This was the first one I made on my own," Tommy said. "A little clumsy, but she'd gone unmarked 18 years, so I made her a stone. It wasn't right to leave her unmarked."

"It's beautiful," I said.

"It's all right. What can I say? I was young."

"Why didn't your father make her a stone?"

"He's been working on her stone for years. I think he'll die before he finishes it, but it's amazing, a portrait of her holding me as a baby, but she felt so alone out here in the cemetery, unmarked, so I made her this one. It's flawed."

He pointed to her gravestone, showed me all the mistakes he made cutting into the word, "Love."

"Words are tough," he told me, and I believed him.

My mother stayed with us the week of Lulu's First Holy Communion. She pocked a small suitcase and two presents: a new camera for me and a graduated pearl necklace for Lulu. The necklace is identical to the one she gave me as a girl. It doesn't look like much at first, just a clasp and string holding one cloudy pearl. A week after I was born my mother walked into Tinto's Jewelers and bought me a single pearl on a string. Mr. Tinto placed my pearl in a blue satin lined box that snapped shut. He told my mother to come back each year on my birthday to add another pearl, but my mother had other plans. She wanted me to grow my pearls.

Here's the story she told me about pearls:

Deep inside an oyster's heart lies a pearl waiting to come alive, but the oyster must wait until it's been tested. Something must try to hurt the oyster's shell before the pearl is born, and when that bad something cracks into the oyster's shell, the oyster takes all of its hidden strength, all of its nacre, and wraps it around that terrible something, over and over and over again, until it becomes beautiful ball of light, a pearl.

Here are some of the pearls I grew:

When I won the spelling Bee in third grade, I got a pearl; when I had my tonsils out, I got a pearl; when Jackie Toomey broke my heart in eighth grade, I got a pearl, and when I moved across the country, I got a pearl. My last pearl came the day I got married. My mother wrapped the pearls around my neck and told me, "A woman needs all of her strength to make a marriage work."

My mother holds a blue box from Tinto's in her hands. She calls Lulu into the living room and asks her, "Have you been a brave girl this year?"

"Oh yes! Oh yes!" Lulu says.

"Tell me one brave thing," my mother says.

Lulu's eyes squint. Her forehead's bent. She's thinking, searching her memories for something brave because she sees my mother holding the blue satin lined box. She fidgets in her seat until a light goes on. An idea has come. She smiles wide, pulls my mother's hand and tells her, "Follow me!"

I follow my poor mother, still clutching the Tinto's box in her hands, wearing her heels and laughing at her own missteps over the grass and rocks. She lets Lulu drag her to where the path begins. Then I know where Lulu's heading. I worry because I haven't told my mother much about Tommy's childhood home, but when we are closer to the workshop, I see no traces of his past. For starters, there's a stone path to the front door so customers will know where to find Tommy, and below the windows, a patch of perennials and hydrangeas attract living birds and butterflies. Out back, where my husband has his stones on display, he's cleared some dead trees to let in more light, and he's raked out years of brush and rot from between the stones his father left behind.

I take my mother inside the workshop, show her the new windows and the sturdy workbench for Tommy's tools. Lulu's favorite spot is the corner, where my husband slept as a child. She finds the old bucket of colored chalk.

"This is Daddy's new workshop," Lulu tells my mother. "He made it with Father Mike."

"Really?" my mother says, very pleased.

"I want to show you the graveyard, Grammy," Lulu says. We follow Lulu to the backyard where my husband's stones are on display.

"This graveyard used to be dark and scary," Lulu explains. She raises her hands above her head and wiggles her fingers. My mother and I laugh, and Lulu knows she's got an audience. "I used to be too scared to touch the gravestones," she goes on, creeping up to a stone with slow exaggerated steps. She moves her eyes from side to side, makes her hands tremble until she lifts her finger into the air before she finally touches the stone.

"See, Grammy, I'm not scared of the gravestones anymore."

"My goodness!" my mother says. "You're a brave girl."

"I am! I am!" Lulu says, all smiles, dancing around my mother's hips, saying anything to get that Tinto's box in her hands, but my mother doesn't let her have it right away.

"First," she tells Lulu, "Grammy needs to tell you a story about pearls."

Father Mike's up at the front of the church. The whole place is covered in Easter lilies and candles, and rising up behind the altar is the stained glass window of Saint Michael dressed in armor, driving the Fallen out of Heaven with a spear. It was the first of ten windows Tommy repaired. All the communicants sit at





the end of pews, their parents and families next to them.

I look over at Lulu, a real life princess, her dress floating around her tiny frame. She pays more attention to her new shoes than she does to Father Mike, but I don't care. My mother snaps a picture of her with the new camera because I'm still figuring out how to use it. Lulu smiles at all three of us, then mouths the word, "Cake." She's so excited about the cake my mother ordered, the one with the Holy Cross made of butter cream frosting.

Father Mike calls the children to line up for their First Holy Communion. My daughter looks over her shoulder at my mother, Tommy and me. Tommy takes my hand and we both smile at Lulu, nudging her with our look to follow the other children. She presses her hands together like she's praying. When she's in front of Father Mike, she cups her hands and whispers, "Amen," but all I see is a mean boy hiding in the woods, watching my Tommy fall.

My husband wants a picture with Father Mike, so after the ceremony we wait in line with the other families. When it's our turn, Father Mike stands behind the three of us. My mother's giddy to meet the man who helped build the workshop, and before she snaps the picture, she yells, "Say cake!" After the picture, my husband says something funny to Father Mike and shakes his hand. My daughter gives him a high five, but I don't shake hands with Father Mike. I hardly know where to look when he addresses me because all I see are Tommy's duct-taped hands. Even when I'm helping Lulu fix her veil against wind, I see Tommy's duct-taped hands.

When we get into the car to drive home, my mother shows me the pictures she took with the new camera. All of the pictures make me smile, except the one of my family with Father Mike. In the picture, my husband's looking at Father Mike, smiling as if Father Mike's made a joke. Lulu seems in on it, too. Her smile's as broad and wide as Tommy's. You'd think my family was meant to be seen in just this way. My husband at peace with the man who duct-taped his hands and Lulu letting him touch her shoulders. I'm the only one not smiling.

"Say cake, say cake, say cake," I tell myself the whole ride home.

"I invited Father Mike to stop by," my husband tells me.

"I guess we have plenty of cake," I say.

My words are prickly. Sharp.

My husband and I are in the kitchen, whispering because Father Mike's in our living room talking to Lulu. Father Mike's brought her a present wrapped in a gold box. My daughter tears into the box and takes out a pink ceramic cross. Father Mike shows her the hook on the back, explains how it hangs on a wall in her room. She holds the cross in her hands like it's a dance partner, twirling three times before she remembers to thank Father Mike.

Tommy and I are still in the kitchen. "It's not his fault the church job fell through," he tells me. His voice is hushed because we're within earshot of Father Mike. Tommy's not looking for a fight. He hands me a plate so I can serve Father Mike a piece of cake. I lob off a corner piece, slap it onto the plate and stab the top of it with a fork, ready to serve.

"I know it's not his fault about the job," I tell him, my voice rising. "I know exactly what is and is not his fault."

"So do I," Tommy takes my waist in his arms, but I push him away. I'm holding the piece of cake and don't want to drop it on the floor. Or maybe I do so I can serve it scraped and mangled to Father Mike. Tommy whispers into my ear, "Please."

"Please what?" I ask him.

I don't need a mirror to tell me my face is red hot.

"He's a good man. We all make terrible mistakes, irrevocable mistakes, but this one needs to end," he tells me, and I feel a surge in my breathing. I don't want to cry, but my words come in pieces.

"You know he was there that night?"

"Yes," he says, smiling a little. "I was the guy in the trunk, remember?"

"How can you joke? How can any of this be funny to you?" My eyes blur with tears and I swallow gulps of air. Tommy's eyes are softened by my tears.

"This thing with Father Mike needs to end," he whispers. "We'll get by without the church job. Besides, he's got more leads on some monuments, real paying gigs, and with the workshop up and running, it's a real job. You know. Real money once I get the momentum going. You'll see."

I nod my head.

"Could be the thing that gets us by," he says, wiping my cheek.

"Maybe it could be just the thing."

"Now we're talking," he says. He kisses the top of my head and I steady the plate in my hands.

My daughter sits on the grass warmed by the sun. She's wearing her Communion dress and her pearl necklace. Today's a special occasion, so I wear my white sundress and Tommy wears a suit coat and tie. We're in our garden under the oak tree, thick with plump green leaves. The sun warms our skin and music coming from the CD player marks the beginning of this celebration of life.

Tommy's draped a sheet over the monument he's made for our pets. It's taken him five months to finish the stone. We each take one end of the sheet and on the count of three we pull the sheet off to see the stone that makes my daughter's heart sprout wings. It's her drawing, every detail, the three of us holding hands with butterflies floating above our heads, and our beloved Perla curling around my ankles, and our Bobo, sitting by my husband's side, and our Mr. Sam perched on my daughter's shoulder. Tommy's even managed the smaller details, like the rays of sun toward heaven, and just below our feet, we're all standing on top of the word, "Love."

I can hardly stop crying, and my daughter tells me, "Momma, this is a happy day."

"Yes, baby," I tell her, using my arm to wipe my nose. "I know it's a happy day. These are happy tears."

My husband's too quick to point out the flaws in his work, but I give him the same advice my daughter gives to me. "It's a happy day, and that's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

"Of course it is," he says, smiling.





—Carmen Luciano



—Kaitley Johnson



—Miro Cabrera



—Meriweather Kimball

ABRAHAM ANAVISKA is a pretty stellar guy, and he makes a mean burrito.

EMMA BOGAN is a writing major at NECC. She has been writing since a very young age; her other hobbies include video games, reading, and the veneration of Great Dead Cthulhu. She hopes to one day enter the publication industry as an editor, live in Bastan, and perhaps spend her free time volunteering with animals.

KATHERINE C. BROMM is a former professional photographer who is artistic in many ways. She creates incredibly detailed miniature scenes, sculpts in polymer clay, designs jewelry, and works with fiber arts. Her next goal is to be an author of poetry, picture books, and young adult fantasy novels. Katherine's other interests include singing Disney songs with her niece and choreographing liturgical dance numbers for her Sacred Dance choir at her local Methodist church. Some call her a renaissance woman because of her many interests. Her poetry currently revolves around the special animals in her life, a small parrot called a sun canure, an energetic mixed breed dog, and a calico cat. Katherine hails from a small town in New Hampshire, but she started life on the other side of the globe. She was born in Japan when her father was based in Okinawa with the U.S. Navy during Vietnam.

SARAH COURCHESNE received her B.A. in English from UMass-Amherst, then made an abrupt swerve and studied veterinary medicine at Tufts University. She now lives in East Kingston, NH and teaches in the Natural Sciences Department at NECC. She is an essayist, a nature writer, a very occasional poet, and she, like everyone else, as they say, has one navel in her. Perhaps one day, it will out.

EMILY CURRAN is an avid photographer and digital designer. She is currently attending NECC to pursue a career in publication design. She hopes to find a wonderful living creating designs and layouts for publications either online or traditional format. She attended the New England School of Photography for her first semester of college and learned many tips and tricks that she still uses today. It taught her to love photography as more of a hobby than a career, and it guided her to where she is today. Her favorite thing to photograph is her cat, Coory, who is a beautiful eight-year-old silver-shaded Persian. Emily has dabbled in many different kinds of art including three-dimensional, two-dimensional, charcoal drawing, and traditional drawing. In her spare time, she enjoys photographing birds in her backyard, attending concerts, and spending time with her friends and family on Cape Cod.

ADAM DORGAN was born in Lynn, MA on May 3, 1981. He has been a student of the arts since high school with a focus on photography, studying independently as well as attending courses at Montserrat College of Art, Middlesex Community College, and NECC. He was featured in Parnassus for a painting in 2002, and he also had work displayed in the President's Gallery at NECC earlier this year. The Eagle Tribune featured an article on a group project that he worked on. Adam Dorgan works and lives in Peabody, MA.

MARY EVERETT is a Biology and English major at NECC. She has had poetry and op-ed pieces regarding sexual identity and feminism published in online and print media, alongside her photography and mixed media work. She lives in Amesbury, MA with her husband Joshua and their chinchilla, Catsby.

JESSICA FISCHER has lived in the small town of Sandown, NH all her life. She enjoys the challenges of creative writing and hopes to become a teacher. She enjoys reading and writing and hopes she will have a positive impact on those around her.

ANGELL PASCUAL FLORES is a first year college student at NECC. Halfway through his senior year in high school, he became a founding member of Guerilla Society, a spoken word team derived from a youth program called Movement City. Angell has found peace and mental clarity

throughout the time that he's been writing and performing poetry. Since age fourteen, he's performed at different socially engaged performance events, including Louder Than A Bomb: Massachusetts, an annual youth poetry slam founded in 2001, in Chicago, and now the largest youth slam in the world. The ability to express and display the product of his own topics of interest, thoughts, and entertaining wordplay freely, along with the ability to creatively share experiences, (not always his own experiences) inspires him to continue writing poetry as often as he can.

PAIGE FOURNIER is a student currently enrolled in Northern Essex Community College. Her major is writing, but she's always had a strong interest in many forms art and loves to create. This semester, she has been exploring photography and photo manipulation in her Digital Imaging class. This has given her a great opportunity to express myself artistically, and this photo is a sample of some of the images she's produced thus far.

CARLOS GONZALEZ (who prefers Cee) is 21 and lives in Lawrence, MA. He is an artist of all kinds but he mainly works around poetry, drawing, design, and photography. Art is his passion and his life!

Winner of multiple photography awards, **NOAH GREENSTEIN**, is a 19 year-old student at NECC. Majoring in the Arts, he hopes to blend his artistic and technical talents. Noah uses his digital photography skills to reflect the beauty and personality of the region. His photos often provide thoughtful views of common sites and landmarks. He is comfortable with black and white and color formats. Noah has been a regular contributor to the Tri-Town Transcript newspaper for several years with images that capture local people and popular events. Greenstein is also an actor, theatre technician, and stage manager for several area theatre programs where he is able to share his creative ideas and skills with audiences through live theatre.

GINGER HURAJT loves to kayak in the summer, cross country ski in the winter, and write poetry all year long. She has the wonderful vocation of teaching writing and literature at NECC.

KARLEY JOHNSON is an aspiring professional artist from North Andover, MA. She is a full-time student at NECC and works part time as a server, activities assistant, and culture ambassador at Ashland Farm Assisted Living Community, which has inspired her to use her artistic talent to inspire others and change the world in a positive way.

MERIWEATHER E. KIMBALL is a liberal arts student in her last semester at NECC. She has been homeschooled for most of her life and is largely self-taught in drawing, with assistance from her mother, encouragement from her father, and distraction by her three younger sisters. She also writes and hopes to eventually publish a current work-in-progress about a dog with psychic abilities. In the meantime she plans to attend Harvard Extension School with her own psychic service dog, Oswin, in tow. She lives in Plaistow.

TYLER KSYPKA is an avid reader and writer of short stories and poetry. While others prefer warm, sunny weather, Tyler is happiest in the wintertime. He aspires to one day be a well known author and to be able to have a long and fulfilling life.

KATIE LANGLOIS. An artist. A woman. A person. An individual dot on a map of the United States, which itself is a small mass on the planet Earth that'll eventually hurl into the sun, causing chaos and death. She also likes donuts.

CARMEN LUCIANO is a talented individual residing in Massachusetts. The majority of her cosplays are inspired by anime and video games she is a fan of. She doesn't get inspired by what is the "now," or popular topics, but sticks with cosplaying for her fans, including costuming

as Sailor Mars from the series "Sailor Moon." She puts great effort into creating her final result as accurately as possible. Besides cosplaying, she has started to do photo editing, which she has done for several of her photos. Carmen edits her photographs with a skillful eye, especially when it comes to specific special effects. Carmen Luciano is an amazing cosplayer and a great photography editor.

JAMES MACLEAN is a primarily self-taught artist who plays with many different mediums but has a strong preference for oil pastels. What James tries to accomplish with his paintings and drawings is an expression of emotion through the use of vibrant colors and distorted human forms. After high school, James held a series of odd jobs until applying to NECC.

AUTUMN MARKEY is a student at NECC graduating in the spring of 2015. She is studying fine arts and plans to continue her education at UMass Lowell in the fall of 2015. Autumn is fascinated by visual elements and principles of design, both when they are embraced and disregarded creating endless possibilities.

GEORGE MEDLINSKAS was born as a little boy in Lawrence. He was an angelic altar boy. He survived CCHS with minimal scarring. He tricked his parents in thinking he was going to BC but at the last moment went to UMASS. He has two children, Chris and Sarah, both of whom attended UMASS. Chris started out as a Forestry Major, changed to Physics, graduated and got a job working with trees. Sarah started out as a Pre-Veterinary Major, changed to Comparative Literature, graduated and got a job working with animals. George sometimes questions the value of an education, even though he has taught for 40 years, 7 in 2nd grade, the rest at Community College, where he teaches Computer Science and Yoga. He is currently taking Digital Photography at NECC, where he is learning his camera and developing his artistic side. His hobbies include doing dishes, kayaking, and hanging out with moss.

JUSTIN MERCED: brother, writer, lover, fighter, snuffer buffer, and huckster. And an all right guy.

CLARE THOMPSON OSTRANDER teaches Basic Writing, English Composition I, and the College Success Seminar at NECC. She loves teaching and she loves writing. Clare has been writing stories since she was eleven years old, but only in the last couple of years has she tried to publish one of her stories. She's proud to have been published in Parnassus, and she's proud to have placed third in a the Spring 2013 Women on Writing Flash Fiction contest. She's also had an essay published on NPR's This I Believe website in the spring of 2014. The inspiration for her recent story, "The Manual for Waitresses Everywhere" comes from her 15 years as a waitress, a time in her life when being a writer and being a teacher seemed like impossible dreams. Her reason for writing remains her daughter, Grace, 9, who loves that her mom writes stories so early each morning.

RYAN SCALLY is a musician who enjoys reading. He might enjoy writing, too.

KARLILL TITONE is a spoken word poet as well as a youth speaker. He hopes to one day publish a book of poetry and travel the world motivating others. He was born in Methuen, but raised in Lawrence in the Prospect Hill area. One day he hopes to inspire the minds of others because motivation is movement.

Thought to have died during the Glorious Revolution of the Free and United States of America, **JAKE WEISBERG**'s works have surfaced throughout the Age. The first such occurrence was a chest stuffed with half-finished, poorly-scribbled poems and fictions and manifestos. The complete cache was recently sold at auction for an astounding 1.2 million dollars. Over the years, his works have made their way to highest orders of the occult and down into the depths of the Black Market World of Art. It is rumored that a genuine Weisberg poem sells for about the price of a human kidney. Today, his works appear spontaneously, always presented in an unmarked manila folder in the same and undisclosed locker at Grand Central Station.

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HOW TO CONTRIBUTE

Submissions to *Parnassus* are limited to NECC students, staff, and faculty, with two deadlines per year.

We accept submissions in the areas of art, photography, fiction, poetry, and creative non fiction.

We want the best, and we know you've got it. Entries are reviewed and chosen democratically each semester by the staff and faculty advisor. Deadlines are announced online and around campus, and *Parnassus* is published at the end of each spring, sometimes during the summer, and occasionally at the beginning of fall. Creative people are like that sometimes. Full information on how to submit your potentially famous work can be found within our oh-so-accessible website:


WWW.PARNASSUSLITMAG.ORG

We look forward to reading and viewing what you send us!

Any questions or comments are encouraged — please send them along to faculty advisor

Patrick Lochelt: plochelt@necc.mass.edu

Many thanks as always to all of our supporters, submitters, and readers for another great year. We couldn't do this without you!



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